

Agamemnon

Aeschylus

Dramatis Personae

WATCHMAN: servant of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.

CHORUS: old men, citizens of Argos.

CLYTAEMNESTRA: wife of Agamemnon, daughter of Leda, sister of Helen.

HERALD: soldier serving with Agamemnon.

AGAMEMNON: king of Argos, leader of the Greek expedition to Troy.

MESSENGER: a servant in the palace.

CASSANDRA: daughter of Priam, King of Troy, a prisoner given to Agamemnon, a priestess of Apollo.

AEGISTHUS: son of Thyestes, cousin of Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra's lover.

SOLDIERS and SERVANTS attending on Agamemnon and on Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus.

The brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus, are both kings of Argos and leaders of the expedition against Troy, launched ten years before the action of the play begins. Agamemnon is the senior of the two. The allied forces under Agamemnon are called the Argives, the Achaeans, or the Danaans, as in Homer's *Iliad*—not Greeks. Priam's city is called Troy or Ilion interchangeably.

[The scene is in Argos immediately in front of the steps leading up to the main doors of the royal palace. In front of the palace there are statues of gods. At the start of the play, the Watchman is prone on the roof of the palace resting his head on his arms. It is just before dawn.]

WATCHMAN |

I pray the gods will give me some relief
and end this weary job. One long full year
I've been lying here, on this rooftop,
the palace of the sons of Atreus,
resting on my arms, just like a dog.

I've come to know the night sky, every star,
the powers we see glittering in the sky,
bringing winter and summer to us all,
as the constellations rise and sink.

I'm still looking for that signal flare, 10
the fiery blaze from Troy, announcing
it's been taken. These are my
instructions [10]

from the queen. She has a fiery heart,
the determined resolution of a man.
When I set my damp, restless bed up here,
I never dream, for I don't fall asleep.
No. Fear comes instead and stands beside me,
so I can't shut my eyes and get some rest.
If I try to sing or hum a tune,
something to do instead of trying to sleep, 20
since I'm always awake, I start to weep,
as I lament what's happened to this house,
where things are not being governed well,
not like they used to be. How I wish
my watching could end happily

tonight, [20]
with good news brought by fire blazing
through this darkness.

[The signal fire the Watchman has been waiting for suddenly appears. The Watchman springs to his feet]

Fire gleaming in the night!

What a welcome sight! Light of a new day—
you'll bring on many dancing choruses
right here in Argos, celebrations 30
of this joyful news.

[Shouting]

It's over! It's over!

I must call out to wake the queen,
Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife,
to get her out of bed, so she can raise
a shout of joy as soon as possible
inside the palace, welcoming this fire—

if indeed the city of Troy's fallen,
as this signal fire seems to
indicate. [30]
For my part, I'll start things off by dancing,
treating my king's good fortune as my own. 40
I've had a lucky dice roll, triple six,
thanks to this fiery signal . . .

[His mood suddenly changes to something much more hesitant and reserved]

But I hope
the master of this house may come home soon,
so I can grasp his welcome hand in mine.
As for all the rest, I'm saying nothing.
A great ox stands on my tongue. But this house,
if it could speak, might tell some stories.
I speak to those who know about these things.
For those who don't, there's nothing I remember.

[The Watchman goes down into the house. Enter the Chorus
of Argive elders, very old men who carry staves to help them stand
up. As they speak, servants come out of the palace and light oil
lamps in offering to the statues of the gods outside the palace doors]

CHORUS

It's now ten years since
Menelaus, 50 [40]
Priam's great adversary,
and lord Agamemnon,
two mighty sons of Atreus,
joined by Zeus in double honours—
twin thrones and royal sceptres—
left this country with that fleet,
a thousand Argive ships,
to back their warrior cause with force,
hearts screaming in their battle fury,
two eagles overwhelmed by grief, 60
crying for their young—wings

beating [50]
like oars, they wheel aloft,
high above their home, distressed
because they've lost their work—
their fledglings in the nest are gone!.*
Then one of the supreme powers—
Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus—
hears the shrill wailing cry,
hears those screaming birds,
who live within his realm, 70
and sends a late-avenging Fury
to take revenge on the transgressors.
In just that way, mighty
Zeus, [60]
god of hospitality,
sends those sons of Atreus
against Alexander, son of Priam—
for that woman's sake, Helen,
the one who's had so many men,
condemning Trojans and Danaans
to many heartfelt struggles, both alike, 80
knees splintering as the fighting starts.*
Now things stand as they stand.
What's destined to come will be fulfilled,
and no libation, sacrifice, or human tears
will mitigate the gods' unbending wrath
of sacrifice not blessed by fire.
But as for us, whose old bodies
confer no honour, who were left behind
when the army sailed so long ago, 90
we wait here, using up our strength
to support ourselves with canes,
like children, whose power,
though growing in their chests,
is not yet fit for Ares, god of war.
And so it is with old men, too,
who, when they reach extreme old age,
wither like leaves, and go their way
three-footed, no better than a

child, [80]

as they wander like a daydream. 100
But you, daughter of Tyndareus,
queen Clytaemnestra,
what's going on? What news?
What reports have you received
that lead you to send your servants out
commanding all this sacrifice?
For every god our city worships—
all-powerful gods above the earth,
and those below, and those in

heaven, [90]

and those in the marketplace— 110
their altars are ablaze with offerings.
Fires rise here and there and everywhere,
right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils
brought from the palace—sweet and holy,
their purity sustains those flames.
Tell us what you can,
tell us what's right for us to hear.
Cure our anxious thoughts.
For now, at one particular

moment, [100]

things look grim, but then our hopes, 120
rising from these sacrificial fires,
make things seem better, soothing
corrosive pains that eat my heart.
I have the power to proclaim
that prophecy made to our kings,
as they were setting on their way,
a happy outcome for their expedition.
My age inspires in me Persuasion still,
the power of song sent from the gods,
to sing how two kings of Achaea's troops, 130
united in a joint command, led

off [110]

the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears,
marching against Troy, land of Teucer.
They got a happy omen—two eagles,

kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships.

One bird was black, the other's tail was white,
here, close to the palace, on the right,
in a place where everyone could see.
The eagles were gorging themselves,
devouring a pregnant hare 140
and all its unborn offspring,
struggling in their death throes still. [120]
Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

Then the army's prophet, Calchas,
observing the twin purposes
in the two warlike sons of Atreus,
saw the twin leaders of the army
in those birds devouring the hare.
He then interpreted the omen, saying, 150
"In due course this expedition
will capture Priam's city, Troy—
before its towers a violent Fate
will annihilate all public

goods. [130]

But may no anger from the gods
cast its dark shadow on our troops,
our great bit forged to curb Troy's mouth.
For goddess Artemis is full of anger
at her father's flying hounds—she pities
the cowering sacrificial creature in distress, 160
she pities its young, slaughtered
before she's brought them into life.
Artemis abominates the eagles' feast."
Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,
but let the good prevail.

"And lovely Artemis

— [140]

though you're gentle with the tender cubs
of vicious lions and take special joy
in the suckling young of all wild living beasts,
promise things will work out well, 170
as this omen of the eagles indicates,

an auspicious sign, but ominous.
 And I call Apollo, god of healing,
 to stop Artemis delaying the fleet,
 by sending hostile winds
 to keep the ships from
 sailing, [150]
 in her demand for another sacrifice,
 one which violates all human law,
 which no feast celebrates—
 it shatters families and makes the wife
 lose all respect and hate her husband. 180
 For in the home a dreadful anger waits.
 It does not forget and cannot be appeased.
 Its treachery controls the house,
 waiting to avenge a slaughtered child.”
 Calchas prophesied that fatal destiny,
 read from those birds, as the army marched,
 speaking by this palace of the kings.
 And to confirm all this
 sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief, 190
 but let the good prevail.
 O Zeus, whoever he may
 be, [160]
 if this name please him as invocation,
 then that’s the name I’ll use to call him.
 As I try to think all these things through,
 I have no words to shape my thoughts,
 other than Zeus—if I truly can succeed
 in easing my heart of this heavy grief,
 this self-defeating weight of sorrow.
 As for Uranus, who was once so great, 200
 bursting with arrogance for every fight,
 people will talk about that god
 as if he’d never
 even lived. [170]
 And his son, Cronos, who came after,
 has met his match and is no more.
 But whoever with a willing heart

cries his triumphal song to Zeus
 will come to understand all things.*
 Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,
 has established his fixed law— 210
 wisdom comes through suffering.
 Trouble, with its memories of pain,
 drips in our hearts as we try to
 sleep, [180]
 so men against their will
 learn to practice moderation.
 Favours come to us from gods
 seated on their solemn thrones—
 such grace is harsh and violent.
 So then the leader of Achaean ships,
 the elder brother, Agamemnon, 220
 did not blame or fault the prophet,
 but gave in to fortune’s sudden blows.
 For Achaea’s army, stranded there,
 on the shores across
 from Calchis, [190]
 was held up by opposing winds at Aulis,
 where tides ebb and flow.
 Troops grew weary, as supplies ran low.
 Winds blew from the Strymon river,
 keeping ships at anchor, harming men
 with too much leisure. Troops grew hungry. 230
 They wandered discontent and restless.
 The winds corroded ships and cables.
 The delay seemed endless, on and on, until
 the men, the flower of Argos, began to wilt.
 Then Calchas proclaimed the cause of this—
 it was Artemis. And he
 proposed [200]
 a further remedy, but something harsh,
 even worse than the opposing winds,
 so painful that the sons of Atreus
 struck their canes on the ground and wept.* 240
 Then Agamemnon, the older king, spoke up:
 “It’s harsh not to obey this fate—

but to go through with it is harsh as well,
 to kill my child, the glory of my house,
 to stain a father's hands before the
 altar [210]
 with streams of virgin's blood.
 Which of my options is not evil?
 How can I just leave this fleet,
 and let my fellow warriors down?
 Their passionate demand for sacrifice 250
 to calm the winds lies within their rights—
 even the sacrifice of virgin blood.
 So be it. All may be well.”
 But when Agamemnon strapped on
 the harsh yoke of necessity,
 his spirits changed, and his intentions
 became profane, unholy,
 unsanctified. [220]
 He undertook an act beyond all daring.
 Troubles come, above all, from delusions
 inciting men to rash designs, to evil. 260
 So Agamemnon steeled his heart
 to make his own daughter the sacrifice,
 an offering for the Achaean fleet,
 so he could prosecute the war
 waged to avenge that woman Helen.
 In their eagerness for war, those
 leaders [230]
 paid no attention to the girl,
 her pleas for help, her cries of “Father!”—
 any more than to her virgin youth.
 Her father offered up a prayer, 270
 then ordered men to seize her
 and lift her up—she'd fallen forward
 and just lay there in her robes—to raise her,
 high above the altar, like a goat,
 urging them to keep their spirits up.
 They gagged her lovely mouth,
 with force, just like a horse's bit,

to keep her speechless, to stifle any curse
 which she might cry against her family.
 As she threw her saffron robe onto the ground, 280
 she glanced at the men, each of
 them, [240]
 those carrying out the sacrifice,
 her eyes imploring pity. She looked
 just like a painting dying to speak.
 She'd often sung before her father's table,
 when, as host, he'd entertained his guests,
 a virgin using her flawless voice
 to honour her dear father with her love,
 as he prayed for blessing
 at the third libation. 290
 What happened next I did not see.
 And I won't say. What Calchas' skill
 had prophesied did come to pass.
 The scales of Justice move to
 show [250]
 that wisdom comes through suffering.
 As for what's to come—you'll know that
 when it comes. So let it be.
 To know would be to grieve ahead of time.
 It's clear whatever is to happen
 will happen, like tomorrow's dawn. 300

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the palace doors]

But I hope whatever follows will be good,
 according to the wishes of our queen,
 who governs here, our closest guard,
 keeping watch all by herself,
 protecting Peloponnesian lands.

CHORUS LEADER

Queen Clytaemnestra, we've come here
 in deference to your royal authority.
 With our king far away, the man's
 throne [260]

is empty—so it's appropriate for us
 to pay allegiance to his wife, the queen.
 I'd really like to hear your news,
 whether what you've heard is good or not.
 Your sacrificial offerings give us hope.
 But we won't object if you stay silent.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 It's a welcome message. As the proverb says,
 "May Dawn be born from mother Night."
 You'll hear great news, greater than all your hopes—
 the Argives have captured Priam's city!

CHORUS LEADER
 What's that you say? I misheard your words—
 what you've just said—it defies belief!

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 I say Troy is now in Achaean hands.
 Is that clear enough?

CHORUS LEADER
 That fills me with joy.
 So much so I can't stop
 crying. [270]

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 Then your eyes reveal your faithful loyalty.

CHORUS LEADER
 Is this report reliable? Is there proof?

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 Of course there is. Unless some god deceives me.

CHORUS LEADER
 Has some vision persuaded you of this,
 something in a dream, perhaps?

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 Not at all.
 As if I'd listen to some dozing brain.

CHORUS LEADER:
 Perhaps some unfledged rumour raised your hopes?

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 Now you're insulting my intelligence,
 as if I were a youngster, just a child.

CHORUS LEADER
 When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 I'll tell you. It was the very night
 that gave birth to this glorious day.

CHORUS LEADER
 How could a messenger get here so
 fast? [280]

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 Hephaestos, god of fire, sent his bright blaze
 speeding here from Ida, his messenger,
 flames racing from one beacon to the next—
 from Ida to Hermes' rock in Lemnos.

From that island the great flames sped
 to the third fire, on the crest of Athos,
 sacred to Zeus, and then, arcing high,
 the beacon light sprang across the sea,
 exulting in its golden fiery power,
 rushing on, like another sun, passing
 the message to the look-out towers
 at Macistus. The man there was not
 sleeping, [290]
 like some fool. Without a moment's pause,
 he relayed the message, so the blazing news
 sped on, leaping across Euripus' stream,

to pass the signal to the next watchmen,
 at Messapion. Those men, in their turn,
 torched a pile of dried-out heather, firing
 the message onward. The flaming light
 was not diminished—its strength kept growing.
 Like a glowing moon, it jumped across
 the plain of Asopus, up to the ridges
 on mount Cithaeron, where it set alight
 the next stage of the relay race of fire. 360
 Those watching there did not neglect their work—
 that light which came to them from far
 away [300]
 they passed on with an even greater blaze,
 which dashed across the shores of Gorgopus,
 to reach mount Aegiplanctus, with orders
 for those there to keep the beacon moving.
 They lit a fire, a huge flaming pillar,
 with unchecked force, speeding the message on—
 its light visible even at the headland
 by the Saronic Gulf. It swooped down, 370
 once it reached the crest of Arachnaeus,
 that look-out near our city—and from there
 jumped down onto the roof of Atreus’
 sons, [310]
 flames directly linked to blazing Troy.
 I organized these messengers of fire,
 setting them up in sequence, one by one.
 In that race the first and last both triumph,
 the ones who sent the message and received it.
 That’s the evidence I set before you,
 a message from my husband, dispatched 380
 all the way from burning Troy to me.

CHORUS

My queen, I’ll offer up to all the gods
 my prayers of thanks, but now I’d like to hear
 the details of your wonderful report.
 Can you tell me the news once more?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

On this very day Achaea’s
 army [320]
 has taken Troy. Inside that town, I think,
 voices cry out in mass confusion.
 If you place oil and vinegar together,
 in the same container, you’ll observe 390
 they never mix, but separate themselves,
 like enemies—well, in Troy the shouting
 of conquerors and conquered is like that,
 matching their very different situations.
 Trojans fall upon their family corpses,
 husbands, brothers. The children scream
 over dead old men who gave them life.
 As captives now, they keep lamenting
 all their slaughtered loved ones. But the Argives,
 famished after a long night’s
 roaming, 400 [330]
 and weary after battle, are set to eat,
 to gorge themselves on what the town affords.
 They’re quartered now in captured Trojan homes,
 sheltered from the night sky’s frost and dew,
 but not according to official rank,
 rather as luck determines each man’s lot.
 They’re happy. They’ll sleep straight through the night,
 without posting a guard. Now, if these troops
 fully and piously respect Troy’s gods,
 a captured country’s divinities and shrines, 410
 those who’ve conquered may not, in their
 turn, [340]
 be conquered. But let no frenzied greed,
 no overpowering lust for plunder,
 fall upon the army from the start,
 so they ravage what they should leave alone.
 For to get safely home, the army needs
 to make that long journey back again.
 But even if the soldiers do reach home
 without offending any god, harsh sorrow
 for the dead may still be watching for them, 420

unless some new disaster intervenes.
 Well, I've let you hear my woman's words.
 May good things now prevail for all to see.
 I take this news as cause for common
 joy. [350]

CHORUS LEADER

You speak wisely, like a prudent man.
 But now I've heard that I can trust your news,
 we must prepare ourselves to thank the gods,
 who've given a blessing worthy of our toil.

[*Clytaemnestra goes back into the palace*]

CHORUS

O Zeus, my king, and friendly Night,
 you've handed us great glories 430
 to keep as our possession.
 You cast upon the towers of Troy
 your all-encompassing hunting net,
 and no one, young or old, escaped
 its enslaving
 fatal mesh [360]
 that overpowered them all.
 I worship mighty Zeus,
 god of hospitality,
 who made this happen.
 For a long time now 440
 he's aimed his bow at Paris,
 making sure his arrow
 would not fall short or fly
 above the stars and miss.
 Men will say it's a blow from Zeus
 and trace his presence in all this.
 He acts on what he himself decides.
 Some people claim that
 gods [370]
 don't really care about those men
 who trample underfoot 450

favours from the pure in heart.
 Such people are profane.
 For we now clearly see
 destruction is the penalty
 for those with reckless pride,
 who breathe a boastful spirit
 greater than is just,
 because their homes are full,
 stuffed with riches to excess,
 beyond what's best for them. 460
 Let men have sufficient wealth
 to match good sense, not so
 much [380]
 it piles up their misfortunes.
 There's no security in riches
 for the insolent man who kicks aside
 and pushes from his sight
 great altars of righteousness.
 Such a man is overpowered
 by perverse Persuasion,
 insufferable child of scheming Folly. 470
 And there's no remedy.
 His evil's not concealed—
 it stands out, a lurid glitter,
 like false bronze when
 rubbed. [390]
 All men can judge his darkness,
 once he's tested by events.
 He's like a child chasing a flying bird.
 He brands his city with disgrace
 which cannot be removed,
 for no god hears his prayers. 480
 The man who lives this way,
 doing wrong, the gods destroy.
 Such a man was Paris. He came
 to the home of the sons
 of Atreus, [400]
 and then abused their hospitality,
 running off with his host's wife.

But she left her people
 the smash of shield and spear,
 a fleet well armed for war.
 To Troy she carried with her 490
 no dowry but destruction.
 Daring what should not be dared,
 she glided through Troy's gates.
 The prophets in this house cried out,
 "Alas, alas for house and
 home, [410]
 and for the royal leaders here.*
 Alas, for the marriage bed,
 still holding traces of her body,
 the one who loved her husband."
 As for him, he sits apart, 500
 in pain, silent and dishonoured.
 He does not blame her—
 no, he aches to be with her,
 the woman far across the sea.
 Her image seems to rule the house.
 Her husband finds no beauty now
 in graceful statues, for to his blank eyes
 all sexual loveliness has gone.
 In his dreams he sees sad
 images, [420]
 with memories of earlier joy—
 a vain relief, for when the man
 thinks he sees such beauty there,
 all at once it's gone, slipping
 through his hands, flying away
 along the paths of sleep.
 These are the sorrows in the house,
 around the hearth, and pain
 much worse than this. For everywhere,
 throughout the land of Greece,
 in every home where men set
 out 520 [430]
 to gather in that army
 there is insufferable grief.

Many disasters pierce the heart.
 People know the ones who leave,
 but every house gets back
 weapons and ash, not living men.
 For Ares, god of war, pays gold
 for soldier's bodies. In spear fights
 he tips the scales, then back from
 Troy [440]
 he ships a heavy freight of ash, 530
 cremated bodies of the dead,
 sent home for loved ones to lament.
 He trades funeral dust for men,
 shiploads of urns filled up with ashes.
 Back home the people weep,
 praising one man for his battle skill,
 another for courageous death.
 Some complain about that woman,
 how she's to blame for all of this—
 but do so quietly.
 Nonetheless, 540 [450]
 this sorrow spreads resentment
 against the leaders of the war,
 the sons of Atreus. Meanwhile,
 over there, across the seas in Troy,
 around the city walls, the hostile ground
 swallows our beautiful young men,
 now hidden in the earth they conquered.
 The people's voice, once angered,
 can create dissent, ratifying a curse
 which now must have its way. 550
 And so, in my anxiety, I wait,
 listening for something murky,
 something emerging from the
 gloom. [460]
 For gods aren't blind to men who kill.
 In time, black agents of revenge,
 the Furies, wear down and bring to nothing
 the fortunes of a man who prospers
 in unjust ways. They wear him out,

reverse his luck, and bring him at last
among the dead. There's no remedy.
To boast too much of one's success
is dangerous—the high mountain peak
is struck by Zeus' lightning
bolt. [470]
I'd choose wealth no one could envy.
May I never be the sort of man
who puts whole cities to the sword.
Let me never see myself enslaved,
my life in someone else's power.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

This welcome fiery message has spread fast;
it's gone throughout the town. But is it true?
Sent from the gods or false? Who knows?

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

What man is such a senseless child
he lets his heart catch fire at this
news, [480]
and then is shattered by some fresh report?

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

That's just the nature of a woman—
to give thanks before the truth appears.

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR

Yes, they're far too trusting.
The proper order in a woman's mind
is easily upset. Rumours women start
soon die out, soon come to nothing.

CHORUS LEADER

We'll quickly know about these signal fires,
flaming beacons passed from place to
place. [490]
We'll find out if that really did occur
or if, just like a dream, this joyful light

560

570

580

has come in order to deceive our hopes.
For I see a herald coming from the shore—
an olive bough of triumph shades his face.
The dry dust on him, all those muddy clothes,
tell me he'll report the facts. Nor will he
light some flaming pile of mountain wood
to pass a signal on with smoke. No—
he'll shout out to us what he has to say,
and we can then rejoice still more,
or else . . . but I won't think of that. Let's have
good news to add to what we know
already. [500]
If anyone is praying for something else
to happen to our city, let him reap
the harvest of his own misguided heart.

[Enter Herald]

HERALD

Greetings to this Argive soil, my father's land.
On this day, ten years later, I've come back. 600
I've seen many hopes of mine destroyed,
and only one fulfilled—I've made it home.
I never dreamed I'd die here in Argos,
with a burial plot in this land I love.
I bless the land, the bright light of this sun—
and I give thanks to Zeus, our highest god,
and to Apollo, lord of Pytho.
May you never fire your arrows at
us [510]
any more. We had enough of those,
my lord, beside Scamander's banks, 610
when you took your stand against us. But now,
Apollo, may you preserve and heal us.
And I greet all gods assembled here,
including Hermes, whom I honour,
the well-loved herald god, worshipped
as the herald's patron. And next I pray
the heroic spirits who sent us off

will welcome back the remnants of our army,
those spared being slaughtered by the spear.
O you hall of kings, you roof I cherish,
you sacred seats and gods who face the sun,
if your shining eyes in days gone
by [520]
have welcomed our king home, then do so now,
after his long absence. He's coming here,
carrying light into this darkness, for you
and all assembled here—our mighty king,
lord Agamemnon. Greet him with full respect.
For he's uprooted Troy—with the pick axe
of avenging Zeus he's reduced her soil.
The altars of the gods and all their shrines
he has obliterated, laying waste
all that country's rich fertility.
Around Troy's neck he's fixed destruction's yoke.
Now he's coming home, king Agamemnon,
the fortunate elder son
of Atreus, [530]
among all men he merits the most honour.
For neither Paris nor his accomplice,
the Trojan city, can ever boast again
their deeds were greater than their suffering.
Guilty of rape and theft, he's lost his loot.
He's utterly destroyed his father's house,
the land, too, which sustained his people.
So Priam's sons have paid the price twice over.

CHORUS LEADER
All joyful greetings to you, herald,
as you come back from our army.

HERALD
I, too, rejoice.
Now I don't fear death—it's as the gods decide.

CHORUS LEADER
Did your love of this land cause you
distress? [540]

HERALD
Yes. That's why my eyes are filled with tears.

CHORUS LEADER
It's as if you had some pleasing sickness.

HERALD
How so? Tell me exactly what you mean. 650

CHORUS LEADER
You suffered from love for those who loved you.

HERALD
You mean the country and the army
both missed each other?

CHORUS LEADER
Yes, so much so,
often my anxious heart cried out aloud.

HERALD
What caused this gnawing trouble in your heart?

CHORUS LEADER
Long ago I learned to keep my silence—
the best antidote against more trouble.

HERALD
Why's that? Were you afraid of someone,
once the kings were gone?

CHORUS LEADER
Indeed I was.
In fact, as you have said, there'd be great

for what light gives a woman greater pleasure
than to unbar the gates to her own husband
as he comes home from battle, once the gods
have spared his life in war?—tell him this,
and give him the message to come home
as soon as possible. The citizens
will love to see him, and when he gets back,
in this house he'll find his wife as faithful
as when he left, a watch dog of the home,
loyal to him, hostile to his enemies,
and, for the rest, the same in every way.
In this long time, I've not betrayed our bond

[610]

I've known no pleasure with another man,
no breath of scandal. About such things
I understand as much as tempering bronze.
I'm proud to state this, for it's all true—
nothing a noble lady should feel shame to say.

[Clytaemnestra exits back into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER

She seems to speak as if she really wants
to tell you something, but, in fact,
to those who can interpret her words well
she's only saying what she ought to say.
But tell me, herald, can I learn something
of Menelaus, this country's well-loved king—
did he make it back safe and sound with you?

HERALD

I can't lie with false good news of
Menelaus, [620]
so his friends can enjoy themselves for long.

CHORUS LEADER

I wish your news of him was true and good.
It's hard when both of these don't go together.

HERALD

Menelaus disappeared—the army
lost sight of him and his ship. That's the truth.

CHORUS LEADER

Did you see him sail off from Ilion,
or did some storm attack the entire fleet
and cut him off from you?

HERALD

Like a master archer, you hit the mark—
your last question briefly tells the story.

CHORUS LEADER

According to the others in the
fleet [630]
what happened? Is he alive or dead?

HERALD

No one knows for certain, except the sun,
moving around the earth sustaining life.

CHORUS LEADER

Tell me how that storm struck the soldiers' ships.
How did the anger of the gods come to an end?

HERALD

It's not right I talk of our misfortunes,
and spoil such an auspicious day as this.
We ought to keep such matters separate
in deference to the gods. When a messenger
arrives distraught, bringing dreadful news
about some slaughtered army, that's one
wound [640]
inflicted on the city. Beyond that,
from many houses many men are driven
to their destruction by the double whip
which Ares, god of war, so loves—
disaster with two prongs, a bloody pair.

750

730

740

760

770

A messenger weighed down with news like this
 should report the Furies' song of triumph.
 But when he brings good news of men being saved
 to a city full of joyful celebrations . . .
 How can I mix the good news and the bad,
 telling of the storm which hit Achaeans,
 a storm linked to the anger of the gods? 780
 For fire and sea, before now
 enemies, [650]
 swore a common oath and then proclaimed it
 by destroying Achaea's helpless forces.
 At night malevolent seas rose up,
 as winds from Thrace smashed ships together.
 Pushed round by the power of that storm,
 and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships
 scattered, then disappeared, blown apart
 by the evil shepherd's whirlwind. Later,
 when the sun's bright light appeared again, 790
 we witnessed the Aegean sea in bloom
 with corpses of Achaean troops and
 ships. [660]
 As for us, some god saved us in secret
 or interceded for us—our boat survived,
 its hull intact. That was no human feat.
 Some divine hand was on our steering oar,
 some stroke of Fortune wanted our ship saved,
 not swamped by surf as we rode at anchor
 or smashed upon the rocky coast. And then,
 once we'd avoided Hades on those seas, 800
 we couldn't believe our luck, as we brooded,
 in the bright light of day, on all our troubles,
 this new disaster which destroyed our
 fleet, [670]
 dispersing it so badly. So on those ships
 if anyone's still breathing, he'll now say
 we're the ones who've been destroyed. Why not,
 when we say much the same of them?
 But let's hope things all turn out for the best.
 As for Menelaus, wait for his return—

that should be your first priority. 810
 If some ray of sunlight finds him still alive,
 his vision still intact, thanks to Zeus,
 whose crafty plans at this point don't include
 destruction of the entire race, there's hope
 he'll soon come home again. Now you've heard this,
 you've listened to the
 truth. [680]
[Exit Herald]
 CHORUS
 Whoever came up with that name,
 a name so altogether true—
 was there some power we can't see
 telling that tongue what to say, 820
 the tongue which prophesied our fate—
 I mean the man who called her Helen,
 that woman wed for warfare,
 the object of our strife?
 For she's lived up to that name—
 a hell for ships, a hell for men,
 a hell for cities, too.
 From her delicately curtained
 room [690]
 she sailed away, transported
 by West Wind, an earth-born giant. 830
 A horde of warriors with shields
 went after her, huntsmen
 following the vanished track
 her oars had left, all the way
 to where she'd beached her ship,
 on leafy shores of Simois.
 Then came bloody war.
 And so Troy's destiny's fulfilled
 — [700]
 wrath brings a dreadful wedding day,
 late retribution for dishonour 840
 to hospitality and Zeus,

god of guest and host,
 on those who celebrated with the bride,
 who, on that day, sang aloud
 the joyful wedding hymns.
 Now Priam's city, in old
 age, [710]
 has learned a different song.
 I think I hear loud funeral chants,
 lamenting as an evil fate
 the marriage Paris brought. 850
 The city's filled with songs of grief.
 It must endure all sorrows,
 the brutal slaughter of its sons.
 So a man once raised a lion cub
 in his own home. The beast
 lacked milk but craved its mother's teat.
 In early life the cub was
 gentle. [720]
 Children loved it, and it brought
 the old men great delight.
 They gave it many things
 and clasped it in their arms,
 as if it were a nursing child.
 Its fiery eyes fixed on the hands
 that fed it, the creature fawned,
 a slave to appetite.
 But with time the creature grew
 and its true nature showed—
 the one its parents gave it.
 So it paid back those who reared it,
 preparing a meal in gratitude, 870
 an unholy slaughter of the
 flocks, [730]
 house awash with blood,
 while those who lived inside the home
 were powerless against the pain,
 against the massive carnage.
 By god's will they'd brought up
 a priest of doom in their own house.

I'd say she first arrived in Troy
 a gentle spirit, like a calming breeze,
 a delicate, expensive ornament
 — 880 [740]
 her soft darting eyes a flower
 which stings the heart with love.
 Then, changing her direction,
 she took her marriage to its bitter end,
 destroying all those she lived with.
 With evil in her train and led by Zeus,
 god of guest and host, she turned into
 a bride of tears, a Fury.
 Among men there's a
 saying, [750] 890
 an old one, from times long past:
 A man's prosperity, once fully grown,
 has offspring—it never dies
 without producing children.
 From that man's good fortune
 spring up voracious pains
 for all his race. But on this
 I don't agree with other men.
 I stand alone and say
 it's the unholy act that breeds
 more acts of the same
 kind. 900 [760]
 A truly righteous house is blessed,
 its children always fair and good.
 Old violent aggression
 loves to generate new troubles
 among evil men—soon or late,
 when it's fated to be born,
 new violence springs forth,
 a spirit no one can resist or conquer,
 unholy recklessness,
 dark ruin on the
 home, 910 [770]
 like the destructiveness
 from which it sprang.

But Righteousness shines out
 from grimy dwellings, honouring
 the man who lives in virtue.
 She turns her eyes away
 from gold-encrusted mansions
 where men's hands are black,
 and moves towards integrity,
 rejecting power and wealth,
 which, though praised, are
 920
 counterfeit. [780]
 Righteousness leads all things
 to well-deserved fulfillment.

[Enter Agamemnon in a chariot with Cassandra and a large military escort]

CHORUS LEADER

Welcome, son of Atreus, my king,
 Troy's destroyer. How shall I address you?
 How honour you without extravagance,
 without failing to say what's suitable?
 For many men value appearances
 more than reality—thus they violate
 what's right. Everyone's prepared to
 sigh 930 [790]
 over some suffering man, though no sorrow
 really eats their hearts, or they can pretend
 to join another person's happiness,
 forcing their faces into smiling masks.
 But a good man discerns true character—
 he's not fooled by eyes feigning loyalty,
 favouring him with watered-down respect.
 Back when you were gathering the army
 in Helen's cause—I won't deny the fact
 — [800]
 I saw you in an unflattering light, 940
 an unfit mind steering our ship astray,
 trying through that sacrifice to boost the spirits
 of dying soldiers. But now, with love,

with a full heart, I welcome your return.
 For those who've won final success, the joy
 is worth the toil. If you enquire, in time
 you'll learn about the men who stayed at home,
 those who with justice stood guard for the city
 and those who failed to carry out what's right.

AGAMEMNON

First I salute Argos and my native
 gods, 950 [810]
 as is right, the ones who worked with me
 for my safe return and for the justice
 I brought down on Priam's city. The gods
 refused to listen to their urgent pleas,
 then cast their ballots—there was no dissent—
 into the urn of blood—to kill their men,
 to wipe out Ilion. The other urn,
 the one for clemency, stood there empty—
 only Hope took up her stand beside it.
 Even now smoke from the burning city, 960
 an auspicious sign, tells of its capture.
 The storms from its destruction still live on.
 As fiery embers cool, their dying breaths
 give off ripe smells of wealth. For all
 this, [820]
 we must give the gods eternal thanks.
 Around Troy we've cast a savage net.
 For a woman's sake, the beast from Argos,
 born from the belly of that wooden horse,
 in the night, as the Pleiades went down,
 jumped out with their shields and razed the city. 970
 Leaping over walls, the ravenous lion
 gorged itself on blood of royalty.
 So much for my long prelude to the gods.
 As for your concerns, I've heard your words,
 and I'll keep them in mind. I agree with you—
 we'll work together. By nature few men
 possess the inborn talent to admire
 a friend's good fortune without envy.

Poisonous malice seeps into the heart,
doubling the pain of the infected man,
weighing him down with misfortunes of his own,
while he groans to see another's wealth. 980
I understand too well companionship
no more substantial than pictures in a glass.
From my experience, I'd say those men
who seemed so loyal to me are shadows,
no more than images of true
companions. [840]
All except Odysseus—he sailed with me
much against his will, but once in harness,
he was prepared to pull his weight for me. 990
I say this whether he's alive or dead.
For other issues of the city and our gods,
we'll set up a general assembly,
all of us discussing things together.
We must make sure what's working well
remains that way in future. By contrast,
where we need some healing medicine,
we'll make a well-intentioned effort
to root out all infectious evil,
burning the sores or slicing them
away. 1000 [850]

[Enter Clytaemnestra with attendants carrying the purple carpet]

Now I'll go inside my palace, my hearth and home,
first, to greet the gods who sent me off
and today bring me back. May victory,
which has been mine, stay with me forever.

*[Agamemnon moves to climb out of the chariot but is held up
by Clytaemnestra's speech]*

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Citizens, you senior men of Argos here,
I'm not ashamed to speak before you all,
to state how much I love my husband. With time,

men's fears diminish. So I'll speak out now.
I don't talk as one who has been taught
by others, so I'll just describe my life, 1010
my oppressive life, all the many years
my husband's been away at
Ilion. [860]
First, it's unmitigated trouble
for a woman to sit at home alone,
far from her man. She has to listen to
all sorts of painful rumours. Messengers
arrive, hard on each other's heels, bearing
news of some disaster—and everyone
tells of troubles worse than those before,
shouted throughout the house. If my husband 1020
had had as many wounds as I heard rumours
coming to this house, he'd have more holes in him
than any net. If he'd died as many times
as rumour killed him, he could claim to be
a second Geryon, that triple-bodied
beast, [870]
and boast of being covered up with earth
three times, one death for every separate shape.
Because of all these spiteful messages,
others have often had to cut me loose,
a high-hung noose strung tight around my neck. 1030
That's why our son, Orestes, is not standing here,
the most trusted bond linking you and me.
He should be, but there's no cause to worry.
He's being cared for by a friendly
ally, [880]
Strophius of Phocis, who warned me twice—
first, of your own danger under Ilion's walls,
second, of people here, how they could rebel,
cry out against being governed, then overthrow
the Council. For it's natural to men,
once someone's down, to trample on him 1040
all the more. That's how I explain myself.
And it's all true. As for me, my eyes are dry—
the welling sources of my tears are parched,

no drop remains. Many long nights I wept
until my eyes were sore, as I kept watching
for that beacon light I'd set up for
you, [890]
but always it kept disappointing me.
The faint whirring of a buzzing fly
would often wake me up from dreams of you,
dreams where I saw you endure more suffering 1050
than the hours in which I slept had time for.
But now, after going through all this, my heart
is free of worry. So I would salute my lord—
the watch dog who protects our household,
the mainstay which saves our ship of state,
the lofty pillar which holds our roof beams high,
his father's truly begotten son, for men at sea
a land they glimpse beyond their wildest hopes,
the fairest dawn after a night of
storms, [900]
a flowing stream to thirsty travellers. 1060
What joy it is to escape necessity!
In my opinion, these words of greeting
are worthy of him. So let there be no envy,
since in days past we've suffered many ills.
And now, my beloved lord, come to me here,
climb down from that chariot. But, my king,
don't place upon the common ground the foot
which stamped out Troy.

[Clytaemnestra turns to the women attending on her who, on her orders, begin to spread out at Agamemnon's feet the tapestries they have brought out from the house, making a path from the chariot to the palace doors. The tapestries are all a deep red-purple, the colour of blood]

You women, don't just stand there.
I've told you what to do. Spread out those tapestries,
here on the ground, directly in his path. Quickly! 1070
Let his path be covered all in red, so
Justice [910]

can lead him back into his home, a place
he never hoped to see. As for the rest,
my unsleeping vigilance will sort it out,
with the help of gods, as fate decrees.

AGAMEMNON

Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,
your speech was, like my absence, far too long.
Praise that's due to us should come from others.
Then it's worthwhile. All those things you said—
don't puff me up with such female honours, 1080
or grovel there before me babbling tributes,
like some barbarian. Don't invite
envy [920]
to cross my path by strewing it with cloth.
That's how we honour gods, not human beings.
For a mortal man to place his foot like this
on rich embroidery is, in my view,
not without some risk. So I'm telling you
honour me as a man, not as a god.
My fame proclaims itself. It does not need
foot mats made out of such embroideries. 1090
Not even to think of doing something bad
is god's greatest gift. When a man's life ends
in great prosperity, only then can we declare
that he's a happy man. Thus, if I act,
in every circumstance, as I ought to now,
there's nothing I need
fear. [930]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't say that just to flout what I've arranged.

AGAMEMNON

You should know I'll not go back on what I've said.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You must fear something, then, to act this way.
You've made some promise to the gods. 1100

AGAMEMNON

I've said my final word. I fully understand,
as well as any man, just what I'm doing.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What do you think Priam would have done,
if he'd had your success?

AGAMEMNON

That's clear—
he'd have walked across these tapestries.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So then why be ashamed by what men say?

AGAMEMNON

But what people say can have great power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

True, but the man whom people do not envy
is not worth their envy.

AGAMEMNON

It's not like a woman
to be so keen on
competition. 1110 [940]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

It's fitting that the happy conqueror
should let himself be overcome.

AGAMEMNON

And in this contest
that's the sort of victory you value?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Why not agree? Be strong and yield to me,
of your own consent.

AGAMEMNON

Well, if it's what you want . . .
Quick, someone get these sandals off—
they've served my feet so well. As I now walk
on these red tapestries dyed in the sea,
may no distant god catch sight of me,
and, for envy, strike me down. There's much shame 1120
when my feet squander assets of my house,
wasting wealth and costly woven finery.

[Agamemnon, in bare feet, comes down from the chariot onto the tapestries]

So much for that.

[Agamemnon turns to call attention to Cassandra in the chariot]

Welcome this foreign
girl [950]
into our house. And do it graciously.
For god, who sees us from far away,
looks down with favour on a gentle master.
No one freely puts on slavery's yoke,
but this girl, the finest flower of all our loot,
comes with us as my army's gift to me.
And now, since you've talked me into this, 1130
I'll proceed into my palace, treading
on this crimson pathway as I go.

[Agamemnon starts to move slowly along the tapestries towards the palace and up the stairs. Cassandra remains in the chariot]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

There is the sea. Who will drain it dry?
It gives us crimson dye in huge amounts,
as valuable as silver, inexhaustible.
With that we dye our garments. And of
these [960]

our house has a full store, thanks to the gods.
 We're rich. We have no sense of poverty.
 I'd have vowed to tread on many clothes,
 to use what we have stored up in our home, 1140
 if an oracle had ordered such a payment
 to save your life. If the root still lives,
 the house can blossom into leaf once more,
 growing high-arching shade, protection
 against the Dog Star's scorching season.
 Your return to your father's hearth and home
 brings us the summer's heat in winter time.
 It's like when Zeus makes wine from bitter
 grapes, [970]
 the house immediately grows cool, once its lord
 strolls through his own halls in complete command. 1150

[By this time Agamemnon has reached the palace doors and has just entered the palace]

O Zeus, Zeus, who accomplishes all things,
 answer my prayers. Take care to bring about
 all things that reach fulfillment through your will.

[Exit Clytaemnestra into the palace. The doors close behind her]

CHORUS

Why does this sense of dread
 hover so unceasingly
 around my heart
 with such foreboding?
 My song of prophecy goes on
 unbidden and unpaid.
 Why can't some calming
 confidence 1160 [980]
 sit on my mind and spurn
 my fears as enigmatic dreams?
 It was so long ago—
 Time has long since buried

deep in sand the mooring cables
 cast when the army sailed to Troy.
 My own eyes tell me
 Agamemnon has returned.
 For that I need no further witness.
 But still, here, deep in my heart, 1170
 the spontaneous song
 keeps up its tuneless
 dirge, [990]
 as the avenging Furies chant.
 It kills my confidence, my hope.
 Everything inside me
 beats against my chest,
 surging back and forth
 in tides of grim foreboding—
 something's moving to fulfillment.
 But I pray my premonitions 1180
 prove false and never come to
 light. [1000]
 For, as we know, boundaries
 of vigorous health break down—
 disease is always pressing hard
 the common wall between them.
 So with the fate of men.
 It holds to a straight course,
 then, all at once, can crash
 upon a hidden rock of grief.
 But if, as a
 precaution, 1190
 men toss overboard
 some part of their rich cargo,
 and time their throw just
 right, [1010]
 the house, though grieving,
 will not completely founder,
 nor will its hull be swamped.
 And Zeus' bountiful rich gifts
 reaped from the furrows every year
 hold off the plague of famine.

But once a murdered man's dark blood 1200
 has soaked the ground, who
 then [1020]
 can bring him back through song?
 Even Aesculapius, whose skill
 could raise men from the dead,
 was stopped by Zeus' thunderbolt.
 Was that not warning to us all?
 If one fate settled by the gods
 did not prevent another fate
 securing an advantage,
 my heart would then outrace my tongue— 1210
 I'd speak out loud and clear,
 I'd cry out my forebodings.
 But now it mutters in the
 dark, [1030]
 uneasy, holding little hope
 for any resolution.
 And still my spirit smoulders.

[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace. She addresses Cassandra, who is still in the chariot]

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 You should go in, too—I mean you up there,
 Cassandra. Zeus, in his mercy to you,
 has made you member of our household,
 one who shares its purification rites. 1220
 So you can take your place before the altar
 of the god protecting all our wealth,
 along with other slaves. So come down.
 Leave the chariot. And leave your pride behind.
 Men say even Hercules, Alcmene's
 son, [1040]
 once long ago was sold in slavery
 and had to eat its bitter bread. If Fate
 has brought you to the same condition,
 be very grateful you serve masters here
 who've been rich forever. Certain men, 1230

those who've reaped a harvest of rich goods
 beyond their dreams, maltreat their slaves.
 They go too far. But here, with us, you'll get
 the treatment our traditions say is right.

CHORUS LEADER *[addressing Cassandra]*
 Our queen is talking to you. Her meaning's clear.
 Fate has caught you in its nets—you'd best obey,
 unless such action is beyond your power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 If she's not like a swallow, with a
 song [1050]
 all her own, something barbarously obscure,
 I'll speak so she can understand. She must obey. 1240

CHORUS LEADER *[to Cassandra]*
 Go with the queen. Of all your options now
 what she says is best. Do as she says.
 Step down from your chariot seat.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 Come down now.
 I don't have time to waste on this girl here.
 Inside, by our central hearth, our victims
 are already waiting for the sacrifice,
 a joyful time beyond our fondest hopes.
 So if you want to play your part in this,
 you'd better come at once. If what I say
 means nothing to you, if you can't
 understand, 1250 [1060]
 at least use your foreign hand to make a sign.

CHORUS LEADER
 An interpreter is what this stranger needs.
 She's like some wild thing, freshly trapped.

CLYTAEMNESTRA
 She's mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart.

She's just left her newly captured city,
 then come here, without sufficient time
 to learn to stomach the controlling bit.
 She will, once her anger's been dissolved
 in foaming blood. But I'll waste no more time,
 dealing with her contempt outside the house. 1260

[Clytaemnestra turns and exits into the palace. The members of the Chorus gather around Cassandra]

CHORUS LEADER
 I'll not lose my temper. I pity her.
 You unhappy creature, why not come
 down? [1070]
 Leave the chariot. Why not accept fate's yoke
 of your own free will?

CASSANDRA *[searching the sky for a sign of Apollo and screaming]*

Aieeeee . . . earth . . . sky . . .
 Apollo . . . Apollo . . .

CHORUS MEMBER
 Why cry out your distress in Apollo's name?
 He's not a god who pays attention
 to those who mourn like this.

CASSANDRA
 Aieeee . . . earth . . .
 sky . . . 1270
 Apollo . . . my destroyer . . .

CHORUS MEMBER
 She cried out again. Such ominous words—
 and to a god who's not the one
 to have around at times of grieving.

CASSANDRA
 Apollo! Apollo! God of the

road . . . [1080]
 You're destroying me. Why leave me here
 beyond all hope a second time?

CHORUS MEMBER
 It looks as if she's going to prophesy,
 to say something of her unhappiness.
 She may be a slave, but inside her 1280
 the god's voice still remains.

CASSANDRA
 Apollo!
 O Apollo! God of the road . . .
 You're obliterating me! Where am I now?
 Where have you led me? What house is this?

CHORUS MEMBER
 If you don't know where you are, I'll tell you—
 you're at the house of the sons of Atreus.
 That's the truth.

CASSANDRA
 No . . . no . . . a
 house [1090]
 that hates the gods . . . house full of death,
 kinsmen butchered . . . heads chopped off . . .
 a human slaughterhouse awash in blood . . . 1290

CHORUS MEMBER
 This stranger's like a keen hound on the scent.
 She's on the trail of blood.

CASSANDRA
 . . . I see evidence I trust—young children
 screaming as they're butchered—then their father
 eating his own infants' roasted flesh . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

We've heard about your fame in prophecy.
But here in Argos no one wants a prophet.

CASSANDRA

O god what's this she has in
mind? [1100]

What new agony inside the house
is she preparing? Something monstrous, 1300
barbaric, evil . . . beyond all love,
all remedy. And help is far away.

CHORUS MEMBER

I don't understand what she's saying now.
What she first said, that I understood—
the whole city talks about it.

CASSANDRA

O evil woman, you're going to do it.
Your own husband, the man who shares your bed—
once you've washed him clean . . . there in the bath . . .
How shall I describe how all this ends?
It's coming soon. She's stretching out her
hand . . . 1310 [1110]
and now her other hand is reaching for him . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

I still don't understand. What she's saying
is just too confused. Her dark prophecies
leave me bewildered.

CASSANDRA

Look! Look over there!
What's that apparition? Is that death's net?
No, she's the net, the one who sleeps with him,
that woman, murder's willing agent.
Let those Furies insatiably at work
against this clan rise up and scream for joy—
they have another victim fit for stoning. 1320

CHORUS MEMBER

What Fury do you now invoke to shriek
throughout this house? What you've just
said [1120]
makes me afraid.

CHORUS

Drop by drop the dark blood flows
around my heart—like mortal wounds
when life's sunset comes,
when death is near.

CASSANDRA

Look over there! Look now!
Keep the great bull from his mate.
She's caught him in her robes

— 1330
now she gores him with her black horn.
A trap! He's collapsing in the bath!
I'm telling you what's going on—
he's being murdered in there,
while bathing—a plot to kill him!

CHORUS MEMBER

I can't boast of any skill with
prophecies, [1030]
but these strike me as pointing to disaster.

CHORUS

What good ever comes to men
from prophecies? They talk of evil.
All those skilful words encourage men 1340
to be afraid of what the prophet chants.

CASSANDRA

Alas for me! Alas for my unwelcome fate!
I'm crying out for my own suffering—
my cup of grief is full, brim full . . .

Why have you brought me here,
so wretched, if not to die,
the second victim? Why else?

CHORUS MEMBER

Your mind's possessed—some god is in
control. [1140]

And so you wail aloud about your death,
just like some shrill nightingale that sings,
without a pause, of her heart's distress,
lamenting all her life for her dead son,
life rich in sorrow.

1350

CASSANDRA

O to have that—
the fate of the singing nightingale!
Gods gave her body wings and a sweet life.
She does not weep. But murder waits for me—
a two-edged sword hacks me to death.

CHORUS MEMBER

These vain prophetic cries of woe you
chant, [1150]

where do they start? Why introduce
such horrific fear into your songs?
How do you set some limit to the path
where what you see so ominously leads?

1360

CASSANDRA

Alas for that wedding . . . Paris and his bride . . .
how it destroyed his loved ones . . .
Alas for the Scamander, river of my home!
By your banks I was raised so long ago,
brought up to all this misery . . . And now it seems
I must soon chant my prophecies
by Cocytus and banks of

Acheron, [1160]

twin rivers of the
dead. 1370

CHORUS MEMBER

What's that? The words seem clear enough—
any child could understand. Your cruel fate
strikes at me like a bloody fang. It hurts.
My heart breaks to hear you chant your sorrows.

CASSANDRA

Alas for my city's fate—
totally destroyed . . .
Alas for my father's sacrifices,
all those grazing herds . . .
offerings to save our walls!
In vain . . . the city was not

spared . . . 1380 [1170]

all that misery it's endured.
Now I, on fire too, must go to ground.

CHORUS MEMBER

You keep repeating what you said before.
Some evil-minded demon, swooping down,
has fallen on you, forcing you to sing,
to chant your songs of death.
Where does this end?
That's what I can't see.

CASSANDRA

Then my prophecy will veil itself no more,
like some new bride half-concealed from view.
Let it now rise as clear as a fresh wind
blowing toward the rising sun, a

wave [1180]

cresting through the dawn and bringing on
a tide of woe far greater than my own.
I'll teach you no more in cryptic riddles.
And you bear witness—run the trail with me,
as I sniff out the track of ancient crimes.
Up there on that roof there sits a chorus—
it never leaves. They sing in harmony,

1390

but the song is harsh, predicting doom.
 Drinking human blood has made them bold—
 they dance in celebration through the house.
 The family's Furies cannot be
 dislodged. [1190]
 Sitting in the home, they chant their song,
 the madness that began all this, each in turn
 cursing that man who defiled his brother's bed.
 Have I missed the mark? Or like a fine archer
 have I hit the beast? Or am I selling lies,
 a fortune-teller babbling door to door?
 Tell me on your oath how well I know
 these old stories of this family's crimes.

CHORUS LEADER

How could an oath of ours be any help,
 no matter how sincere, to heal your grief?
 But I'm amazed that you, born overseas,
 can say so much about a foreign
 city, [1200]
 as if you'd lived here.

CASSANDRA

It was Apollo,
 god of prophecy, who made me what I am.

CHORUS MEMBER

Surely the god was not in love with you?

CASSANDRA

I used to be ashamed to talk of this . . .

CHORUS MEMBER

When we're doing well, we all have scruples.

CASSANDRA

Apollo was like a mighty wrestler,
 panting all over me, in love.

1400

CHORUS MEMBER

Did you go through with it—
 bear him a child?

CASSANDRA

I promised to,
 but then I broke my word.

CHORUS MEMBER

Did you already have prophetic skill,
 inspired by the god?

1410

CASSANDRA

At that time
 I used to prophesy to all my
 countrymen. [1210]
 I'd foretell disasters.

CHORUS MEMBER

How did you escape Apollo's anger?

1430

CASSANDRA

Since I resisted him, no one believes me.

CHORUS MEMBER

But to us, at least, what you prophesy
 seems true enough.

CASSANDRA

Aieee . . . the pains I feel.
 The fearful labour pains of true prophecy
 seize me, confuse me, as they start again,
 full of foreboding. Look there—see those creatures,
 young ones, sitting by the house, dark shapes,
 like something from a dream? They're like children
 murdered by their loved ones . . . their hands are full,
 clenching chunks of their own flesh as
 food, 1440 [1220]
 their guts and inner organs . . . it's all so clear . . .

that awful meal their own father tasted.
 For all that, I say, revenge is on the way,
 someone's planning it, a craven lion,
 a beast wallowing in bed, keeping watch,
 waiting for my master to get back.
 Yes, my master—since I must now bear
 the yoke of slavery. That lord of war,
 who led the fleet and ravaged Ilion,
 has no idea what that cur is up to, 1450
 what evil plans the hateful bitch is hatching,
 as her tongue licks his hands in welcome,
 ears perked up for joy, like treacherous
 Ate, [1230]
 goddess who destroys. It's outrageous—
 the woman kills her man. What shall I call her?
 What awful monster suits her? A snake?
 An amphisbaena with a head at either end?
 Or perhaps a Scylla living in the rocks,
 preying on sailors, raging mother of hell,
 who breathes relentless war on loved ones. 1460
 How that woman, in her audacity,
 screamed out in triumph, like a battle cry,
 pretending to enjoy his safe return!
 Whether you credit what I say or not—
 that doesn't really matter. Why should it?
 What will come will come. And soon
 enough, [1240]
 as you stand here full of pity, you'll say
 Cassandra's prophecies were all too true.

CHORUS
 I understand about Thyestes' meal,
 and tremble thinking how he ate his children's flesh. 1470
 Terror grips me as I hear these truths
 without embellishment. As for the rest,
 hearing that just makes me lose my way.

CASSANDRA
 I tell you you'll see Agamemnon dead.

CHORUS MEMBER
 Poor girl, calm yourself. Tone down those words.

CASSANDRA
 No—no one can heal what my words prophesy.

CHORUS
 Not if they're true. But may the gods forbid!

CASSANDRA
 While you pray here, others move in to
 kill. [1250]

CHORUS LEADER
 What man is going to commit such crimes?

CASSANDRA
 What man? You've completely missed the point. 1480
 You've failed to understand my prophecies.

CHORUS LEADER
 Yes I have—
 I don't see who has means to do it.

CASSANDRA
 Yet I can speak Greek well enough.

CHORUS LEADER
 So does the oracle at Delphi,
 but understanding what it says is hard.

CASSANDRA
 O this fire! His fire comes over me once more!
 The pain . . . Lycian Apollo . . . burning me . . .
 That two-footed lioness . . . crouching there
 with a wolf, once the noble lion's gone . . .
 She's going to kill me . . . the
 agony! 1490 [1260]

Now she prepares her drugs, and in her rage,
 vows I too will be a part of her revenge,
 as she whets a sword to kill her king.
 He brought me here. Now we both die.
 Her retribution. So why do I bear
 these ornaments that mock me, this rod,
 these prophet's wreaths around my neck?
 Let me be rid of you before I die . . .

[Cassandra breaks her wand and throws off the insignia of her office
 as a prophet]

There, an end to you. With you down there,
 I get revenge. Make some other woman rich. 1500
 Let her preach destruction instead of me.

[Cassandra now starts tearing off her clothes]

Look how Apollo now in person strips me,
 rips my prophetic robes, the god who
 watched, [1270]
 as my friends in their hatred turned on me,
 mocked me so savagely in these very clothes—
 they thought they knew what they were doing.
 But they were wrong. I heard them call me names,
 “beggar,” “starving wretch”—I endured them all.
 And now the prophet god is done with me.
 He's led his prophet to her place of death. 1510
 No father's altar for me here—instead
 a chopping block awaits, slaughtered
 in one hot stroke of bloody sacrifice.
 But we'll not die without the gods' revenge.
 Another man will come and will avenge
 us, [1280]
 a son who'll kill his mother, then pay back
 his father's death, a wanderer in exile,
 a man this country's made a stranger.
 He'll come back and, like a coping stone,
 bring the ruin of his family to a close. 1520
 For gods have made a powerful promise—

his father's stretched out corpse will bring him home.
 Why then do I lament so piteously?
 Since I'm the one who first saw how Troy
 would be wiped out the way it was,
 since I see now how those who took the city
 are being destroyed in judgment from the gods,
 I'll go to meet my fate. I'll dare to

die. [1290]

I greet this doorway as the gates of Death.
 Once the death blow strikes, I pray I'll have 1530
 a gentle end—no struggle, as my life blood
 drains away. And then I'll close my eyes.

CHORUS LEADER

You poor woman, so much pain and wisdom.
 You've said so much. But if you see your death—
 see it so clearly—how can you go on
 so bravely to the altar, like an ox
 destined by gods for sacrifice?

CASSANDRA

There's no way out. My friends, the time has come.

CHORUS LEADER

But there's some benefit in going
 last. [1300]

CASSANDRA

This is the day. It makes no sense to run. 1540

CHORUS LEADER

You know, you endure your suffering
 with courage I admire.

CASSANDRA

No one hearing that
 has reason to be glad.

CHORUS LEADER

But to die well
confers some human dignity.

CASSANDRA [*approaching the door then moving back in horror*]
I cry for you, my father, your noble children.

CHORUS LEADER

What's wrong? Why turn around in fear?

CASSANDRA

This house . . . It's horrific!

CHORUS

Why call out in horror? Is there some vision
in your mind?

CASSANDRA

It's this house—
it stinks of murder, blood slaughter . . . 1550

CHORUS LEADER

No, no—that's the smell of
sacrifice, [1310]
victims at the hearth.

CASSANDRA

That smell . . .
it's like an open grave . . .

CHORUS

Do you mean the splendid Syrian incense?
It's all through the house.

CASSANDRA [*turning back to the palace doors*]

No. But I must go.
I'll lament my death, and Agamemnon's, too,
inside the house. Enough of living!
Alas, my friends, I'm not holding back in fear,

like some bird trapped in bushes. I want you
to witness how I went to meet my death, 1560
when for me another woman will be killed,
a man will die for one who married evil.
This is my last request before I
die. [1320]

CHORUS LEADER

I pity you, poor creature, and your death,
which you have prophesied.

CASSANDRA

One last time
I feel the urge to speak, not sing a dirge
about my death. I pray to the sun,
here in the light of his most recent day,
that those who carry out revenge for me
will make my enemies pay with their blood 1570
for butchering a slave, an easy victim.
Alas, for human life. When things go well,
a shadow overturns it all. When badly,
a damp sponge wipes away the picture.
Of these two, the second is more
pitiful. [1330]

[*Cassandra exits slowly and deliberately through the palace doors,
which close behind her*]

CHORUS

To rest unsatisfied amid great wealth
is in the nature of all human beings.
No one can point and order it away
from princely homes by uttering the words
"Dissatisfaction, enter here no more!" 1580
Take Agamemnon. The powers in heaven
permitted him to capture Priam's town,
to return home honoured by the gods.
But now, if he must pay the penalty
for blood which other men before him shed

and die in retribution for the
dead [1340]
he killed himself, what mortal human being
who hears all this can boast he lives
a life unscarred by fate?

[A scream comes from inside the palace]

AGAMEMNON *[from inside]*

Help me!

I'm hit . . . a deadly blow . . .

CHORUS LEADER

Silence! 1

590

Who cried out then? Something about a deadly blow.

AGAMEMNON *[within]*

Aaagh! I'm hit again . . . a second blow . . .

CHORUS LEADER

That's the king in there. Those cries, I think,
tell us what's going on. Come now, let's decide
what's best to do, our safest course of action.

[At this point the Chorus breaks up in panic, losing its unity as a group. Individual members speak to each other in great confusion]

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

Here's my advice—summon all the people,
call them to bring help up to the palace.

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

I say we must attack the house at
once, [1350]
catch them at it, swords still wet with blood.

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

My view is we should do something like that.
I vote we act. There's no time to delay.

1600

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR

It's all so clear. This is their opening move—
a sign they're going to tyrannize the city.

CHORUS MEMBER FIVE

We're wasting time. They've thrown aside
all sense of hesitation. Their hands won't rest.

CHORUS MEMBER SIX

I don't know what scheme I could propose.
It's up to those who can carry out the plan
to tell us what to do.

CHORUS MEMBER SEVEN

That's my view,
too. [1360]

I don't know how to bring the dead to life
with nothing but our words.

CHORUS MEMBER EIGHT

But just to stay
alive, 1610
should we bow down before these tyrants,
who desecrate the house?

CHORUS MEMBER NINE

No. We can't do that.
Death would be preferable, a gentler fate
than such a tyranny.

CHORUS MEMBER TEN

But should we assume,
just on the basis of those groans we heard,
that Agamemnon's dead?

CHORUS MEMBER ELEVEN

Before we act,
we must have clearer evidence. To guess like this
is not really knowing what is true or not.

CHORUS LEADER

That's it then—everyone agrees on this
— [1370]
we need to know more clearly how things stand 1620
with Agamemnon, son of Atreus.

[The palace doors open, revealing the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Clytaemnestra stands over them. She is covered in blood]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Before this moment I said many things
to suit my purposes. I'm not ashamed
to contradict them now. How else could I
act on my hate for such a hateful man,
who feigned his love, how else prepare my nets
of agony so high no one could jump them?
I've brooded on this struggle many years,
the old blood feud. My moment's come at last,
though long delayed. I stand now where I struck, 1630
where I achieved what I set out to do.
I did all this. I won't deny the
fact. [1380]

Round this man I cast my all-embracing net,
rich robes of evil, as if catching fish—
he had no way out, no eluding fate.
I stabbed him twice. He gave out two groans.
Then as his limbs went limp, I hit again,
a third blow, my prayerful dedication
to Zeus, underground protector of the dead.
He collapsed, snorting his life away, 1640
spitting great gobs of blood all over
me, [1390]
drenching me in showers of his dark blood.
And I rejoiced—just as the fecund earth

rejoices when the heavens send spring rains,
and new-born flower buds burst into bloom.
That's how things stand, old men of Argos.
Be joyful, if that's how you feel. For me,
this is my triumph. If it were fitting
to pour libations on this corpse,
I'd pour my curses out—that would be just. 1650
He filled the mixing bowls in his own house
with such destructive misery, and now
he drinks it to the dregs. He's home at last.

CHORUS LEADER

What you say I find incredible!
How can that tongue of yours gloat like this,
exulting over your dead
husband? [1400]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

You're testing me, as if I were some silly woman.
But my heart is fearless. Let me tell you
what you already know—then you can praise
or criticize me as you like. I don't care. 1660
This man is Agamemnon, my husband.
He's a corpse, the work of this right hand,
a work of justice. That's how matters stand.

CHORUS LEADER

Woman, what earth-grown poison have you eaten,
what evil drink drawn from the surging sea,
that you're so mad to risk the public voice,
the curses people mutter? You cast him off.
You cut him down. So now you'll be thrown
out, [1410]
exiled from the city—a hateful thing
to your own people.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

So
now 1670

you'd sentence me to banishment,
 send me from the city a thing accursed?
 Back then you made no accusation
 against this man lying here. He sacrificed
 his own child, that dear girl I bore in pain,
 to charm the winds from Thrace—and didn't care.
 To him she was a beast for slaughter.
 He had flocks of them—his farms were full.
 Shouldn't you have banished him from Argos
 in punishment for that polluting
 crime? 1680 [1420]
 You're strict enough when you pass judgment
 on what I've done. So let me caution you—
 I'm prepared to fight you head to head.
 If you win, well then, you can govern me.
 But if god lets me prevail, you old men
 will learn, old as you are, to behave yourselves.

CHORUS LEADER

You're too ambitious, far too arrogant.
 Blood-drenched murder's made you mad. That's plain.
 Your eyes are full of blood. Now stroke for stroke
 you'll pay for what you've done. You've lost your friends, 1690
 you've lost
 your honour . . . [1430]

CLYTAEMNESTRA [*interrupting*]

Then hear this, too, the force behind my oath—
 by that Justice I exacted for my child,
 by Ate, goddess of destruction,
 by the Fury to whom I offered up this man,
 my hopes will never walk these halls in fear,
 so long as Aegisthus stokes the blazing fires
 in my hearth. And he's as loyal to me now
 as always, my shield, no man to trifle with.
 He'll boost my confidence. Here he lies, 1700
 the man who abused his wife, seduced
 by every captive girl at Ilion—
 and here she lies, his concubine, his spear

prize, [1440]
 the faithful prophetess who shared his bed.
 She also knew the rowing benches
 where sailors sweat. They get what they deserve.
 He's dead. She, like a swan, sang her last song,
 then died. Now she lies there, his sweetheart.
 She'll bring new thrills, fresh pleasures to my bed.

CHORUS

O that some Fate would soon come, 1710
 free from suffering and quick,
 bringing endless
 sleep, [1450]
 our last eternal sleep,
 now our gracious lord is dead.
 For a woman's sake
 he suffered much, and now
 by a woman's hand he died.
 Alas for you, Helen, frantic woman.
 On your own, beneath Troy's walls,
 you slaughtered many lives, 1720
 and more than many.
 Now you wear your final garland—
 one long remembered for the blood
 which will never wash
 away. [1460]
 Back then in this house
 lived a spirit of strife,
 a power that broke our king.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't torment yourself like this, invoking
 death and fate, or redirect your rage
 on Helen, as if she killed those men, 1730
 all those Danaan lives, all by herself,
 and brought us pain past remedy.

CHORUS

O spirit that falls upon this house,

on Menelaus, on Agamemnon,
 descendants of Tantalus,
 you overpower me
 through these two
 sisters, [1470]
 each with power like a man.
 You consume my heart with grief.
 Perched on his

corpse 1740
 the hateful raven caws her song,
 her harsh triumphal tune.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're talking sense, when you call on
 the demon of this house, who's eaten up
 three generations, the one who nurtures
 bloodlust in our guts. And so new blood
 spurts out before the old wound
 heals. [1480]

CHORUS

You appeal to that huge fiend
 haunting this house,
 whose anger weighs it down, 1750
 to that tale of evil fate
 insatiably consuming us.
 Alas, alas, the will of Zeus,
 the cause of everything,
 who brings all things about.
 What can come to mortal men
 except at Zeus' will?
 And in what's happened here
 what's not caused by the gods?
 Alas, my king, my lord

— 1760
 How shall I weep for
 you? [1490]
 How speak of you with love?
 To lie entangled in the spider's web,

gasping life away—a sacrilege—
 stretched out on this bed of shame,
 struck down in treachery,
 the two-edged sword
 wielded by your wife.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Are you saying this work is mine? That's not so.
 Don't think of me as Agamemnon's wife. 1770
 The form of this corpse's wife was taken
 on [1500]
 by the ancient savage spirit of revenge.
 For that brutal meal prepared by Atreus,
 it sacrificed one full-grown man,
 payment for two butchered children.

CHORUS

Who would ever say
 you bear no guilt
 for Agamemnon's murder?
 How could they? How?
 Yet that avenging
 spirit 1780
 acting on his father's crime
 could well have egged you on.
 Black Ruin moves ahead with

force [1510]
 through streams of family blood
 granting vengeance for the young
 served up as chunks of meat.
 Alas, my king, my lord—
 How shall I weep for you?
 How speak of you with love?
 To lie entangled in the spider's web, 1790
 gasping life away—a sacrilege—
 stretched out on this bed of shame,
 struck down in treachery,
 the two-edged sword

wielded by your
wife. [1520]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I don't think the man died wretchedly,
like some poor slave. Surely his own deceit
brought ruin on this house? His suffering
matches exactly what he did himself.
Remember my own Iphigeneia, 1800
his daughter, that sweet flower whom we mourn.
So let him not boast out loud in Hades.
He was the first to draw his sword,
and by the sword he's been repaid.

CHORUS

There's no clear way, and
now [1530]
this family's falling. I'm afraid.
It's not just bloody drops. No,
storms of blood rain batter down,
destroying the house, while fate
on yet another whetstone,
hones the edge of Justice, 1810
for the next act, one more crime.
O Earth, my Earth—
how I wish you'd swallowed me
before I ever saw my king
lying low on such

bed, [1540]

a silver-plated bath.
Who will now bury him?
Who will lament for him?
Will you dare to do this, 1820
a woman mourning for the spirit
of the husband she's just killed,
complete the injustices you've done
with wretched favours to the dead
to expiate your monstrous crimes?
As people stand around the grave

to praise this god-like man, in tears,
whose sad heart will be
sincere? [1550]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

That business is none of your concern.
At our hands he collapsed in death. 1830
We'll bury him. But this house will not weep.
No. Iphigeneia will meet him down there,
as is fitting—the daughter greets her father
happily by that swift stream of sorrow.
Then she'll embrace the man with love.

CHORUS

One disgrace exchanged for yet
another, [1560]
the struggle to decide is hard.
The man who sins is sinned against,
the killer pays the price.
Yet while Zeus sits upon his throne 1840
this decree from god remains—
the man who acts will suffer.
Who can then cast from this house
its self-perpetuating curse?
This race is wedded to destruction.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Now you're close to getting at the truth.
For my part, I'm prepared to swear an oath
to the demon of the House of Atreus—
I'll rest content with what's been
done, [1570]
hard though that is, if he'll leave this house alone, 1850
transferring family murder somewhere else,
to some other clan. I don't need much,
a small part of our wealth, if I can free
these halls entirely of this madness,
the urge we have to kill each other.

[Enter Aegisthus with armed attendants. The situation now grows increasingly tense, with the soldiers menacing the members of the Chorus, who begin to coalesce as a political unit, rediscovering their strength. This sense of a major irreconcilable political division and the threat of civil war grows increasingly acute until the end of the play]

AEGISTHUS

What a glorious day of retribution!
 Now I can say that once again the gods
 looking down on men avenge their crimes.
 How it fills my heart with joy to see this man
 stretched out here in a robe the Furies
 wove, 1860 [1580]
 full payment for deceitful treachery
 his father's hand devised. For Atreus,
 king of Argos, was this man's father.
 To set the record straight, my father,
 Thyestes, brother to Atreus,
 challenged his authority. So Atreus
 expelled him from his home and city.
 But Thyestes in his misery returned,
 a suppliant at his own hearth, praying
 Fate would save him, he would not be killed, 1870
 his own blood would not stain his native ground.
 Atreus, the godless father of this
 man, [1590]
 welcomed him effusively, but not with love.
 He set up what seemed a celebration—
 a feast day with lots of meat, but served
 my father flesh of his own children.
 He sliced their toes and fingers off. Over these
 he diced the other parts, then passed this dish
 to Thyestes, where he sat beside him.
 My father then, in total ignorance, 1880
 took the food he didn't recognize,
 and ate the meal which, as you've witnessed,
 destroyed the race. When Thyestes learns
 the abominable thing he's done, he screams,

staggers back, vomits up the butchered flesh.
 Then, kicking down the banquet table
 to underscore his cry for justice,
 he calls down on the House of Atreus
 a curse no one can bear, "Let them all
 die, [1600]
 the race of Pleisthenes—all die like this."* 1890
 That's why you see this man lying here.
 This murder was my plan for justice.
 For Atreus threw my broken father out,
 and me as well, his third son, still a child,
 an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes.
 But I grew up. And Justice brought me back.
 I seized the man who'd banished me.
 I planned each detail of this murderous scheme.
 Now I see him in the nets of
 Justice, [1610]
 I can face even my own death with joy. 1900

CHORUS LEADER

To me you're contemptible, Aegisthus,
 getting pleasure from all this agony.
 You say you killed the king deliberately,
 and planned the cowardly slaughter on your own.
 I tell you—remember this—when justice comes,
 your head will not escape the people's cursing
 or death by stoning at their hands.

AEGISTHUS

So you say—but you man the lower oars.
 Your masters on the higher tiers control the ship.
 You may be old, but you'll learn how painful 1910
 it is at your age to be taught your
 place. [1620]
 Hunger pangs and chains, two worthy teachers,
 make excellent cures for teaching wisdom,
 even with old men. Surely you have eyes.
 Can't you see this? You shouldn't kick at thorns.
 You'll only hurt yourselves.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE

You womanly creature!
You stayed at home, waiting out the war,
until the men came back. You soiled a real man's bed,
then planned to kill our king.

AEGISTHUS

This talk of yours
will soon give you sufficient cause to weep. 1920
The tongue of Orpheus was not like yours—
the pleasure of his voice drew all things to
him. [1630]
Your puny squawking merely irritates.
But once I chain you up, my force has ways
to make you more compliant.

CHORUS MEMBER TWO

As if you rule in Argos!
You, the one who plotted Agamemnon's death,
but weren't brave enough to kill the man yourself!

AEGISTHUS

Clearly it was the woman's role to trick him.
I was not a man whom he would trust. 1930
After all, I'm an old enemy of his.
But with his wealth I'll try to rule the people.
Those who resist I'll strap under the
yoke. [1640]
It won't be light—not like a well-fed trace horse.
No. Miserable starvation in the dark—
then we'll see how docile they can be.

CHORUS MEMBER THREE

You coward!
Why not kill the man yourself? Why rely
upon that woman for the murder,
a disgrace to her own country and its gods?
O can Orestes still see the light of day? 1940

If his good fortune holds, will he come home,
win out, and kill the two of them up there?

AEGISTHUS

If that's the way you want to act and speak,
you'll get your lesson fast. Men, stand ready.
My trusty guard, your work's in front of
you. [1650]

[The soldiers place their weapons at the ready and move into menace the Chorus. The Chorus stands its ground, raising their staves as weapons]

CHORUS LEADER

Don't give way. Each of you, get your weapons ready.

AEGISTHUS *[half drawing his sword]*

My hand is on my sword, as well.
I'm not afraid to die.

CHORUS LEADER

You say you'll welcome death. That's good to hear.
We're happy to oblige.

[Clytaemnestra, alarmed at the way in which the conflict has grown, moves quickly between the guards led by Aegisthus and the Chorus]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Stop this, my
dearest. 1950
Let's not act to bring on further trouble.
Our wretched harvest is bountiful enough—
we've reaped sufficient pain. No more bloodshed.
You honourable old men, go home. Yield to fate,
before you hurt yourselves. What we've done here
we had to do. Let our troubles end right now.
That we'll allow, even though our
fate [1660]
has struck a heavy blow. That's my advice,

what a woman ought to say, if any here
will act on it.

AEGISTHUS

What about these men
who let their tongues prattle on against me,
hurling insults in my face, testing fate?
They throw aside all moderate restraint
to abuse their master.

1960

[Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus back slowly into the palace and close the doors, leaving the guards and Chorus still facing each other. Slowly the Chorus disintegrates and its members walk off one by one. The guards form up in front of the palace, an armed defence before the doors]

CHORUS LEADER

Men of Argos
will never cringe before an evil man.

AEGISTHUS

I'll get my own back soon enough.

CHORUS LEADER

Not if fate brings Orestes home again.

AEGISTHUS

I understand how exiles feed on hope.

CHORUS LEADER

Go on. Fatten yourself up. While you still can,
pollute all Justice.

AEGISTHUS

You must know you'll
pay 1970 [1670]
for all this insolence to me.

CHORUS

Keep on bragging—
just like a cock beside his hen.

CLYTAEMNESTRA *[pulling Aegisthus towards the palace doors]*

Leave them their feeble yelping. You and I
control the house. We'll put things in order.